

Are You Ready to Make a Change?

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Many people seek therapy because some kind of change, usually negative, has been thrust upon them – the end of a relationship, loss of a job, loss of a loved one, a physical illness, etc. Many others seek therapy because they want to make some kind of major, positive change in their lives (maybe a new relationship, new career path, etc.), but they feel “stuck” and need some help to get there. Or maybe they want to make some changes within themselves – to be more content, less irritable, more accepting, etc. But of course, this is easier said than done. So...how do you know if you are really ready to make that change?

Think about something in your life that you'd really like to change. Something relatively serious, like quitting smoking, changing your diet, exercising, drinking less alcohol, etc. Be honest with yourself – pick something that you really want to change in your life, but you haven't yet done so. Now, read the following descriptions about the stages of change. Can you identify which stage you are in regarding that thing you'd like to change?

Precontemplation: You really have no desire or intention to change. In fact, you don't see your behavior as a problem at all. Note: chances are, if you'd identified something you'd like to change, you are not in precontemplation.

Contemplation: You've been thinking about wanting to make a change, but you're not really committed to the idea yet. Maybe you're hemming and hawing the pros and cons of making that change vs. keeping things the way they are. This is a critical step in the change process. Take your time to fully think things through. A good exercise would be a “decisional balance” sheet – actually write out the pros and cons of changing your behavior vs. keeping things the same.

Preparation: You're ready to make a change in your life, you just haven't quite hit the ground yet. But you've been seriously thinking about it, making plans, and getting ready to get started. If you've gotten to this point, congratulations! Now is the time to think about the following: what is keeping me from taking action? What would have to happen in my life in order for me to decide to take that action?

Action: This is it – you're implementing your plan for change. Perhaps you are changing your diet, beginning to exercise regularly, moderating your drinking, quitting smoking, or even making changes to relationships in your life. This is a

wonderful step, but also a challenging one, as it isn't easy to break old habits, and to turn new behaviors into habits.

Maintenance: If you're in this stage, then you've already implemented your plan for change and things are going well. Your plan is working, and hopefully you are beginning to see some positive results. Chances are, if you are in this stage, you are not looking for help through counseling, because you are already doing it on your own – unless you have concerns that you will have difficulty maintaining the new behavior.

Relapse: Relapsing, or reverting to old behaviors, is often part of the process of change. If you've been working to change a behavior and have relapsed, it's okay. It's a completely normal part of the process. It's important to not beat yourself up about this, because that will make it harder for you to pick yourself up and try again. Oftentimes, it can be helpful to seek the support of a therapist at this time, someone who can help you identify the factors which led to your relapse and help you find the motivation to try again.

So, have you determined where you fit along the continuum? My guess is that if you have come to this page, you are likely in either contemplation, preparation, or relapse. If so, try asking yourself these questions: On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being “not at all motivated” and 10 being “absolutely gung-ho”), how motivated are you to make that change? What would have to happen for that number to be higher? On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being “not likely at all” and 10 being “extremely likely”), how likely do you think it is that you will succeed in changing the behavior? What would have to happen for that number to be higher? And lastly – what would be the downside to changing my behavior?

All of these questions, and more, are wonderful topics to explore in brief therapy. A counselor who is trained in Motivational Enhancement can help you to identify the factors which prevent you from making changes, find your inner strength and motivation, and make that change.

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